

that the difference in accuracy according to age was significant (chi square (1,  $N=374$ ) = 22.85,  $p < .001$ ).

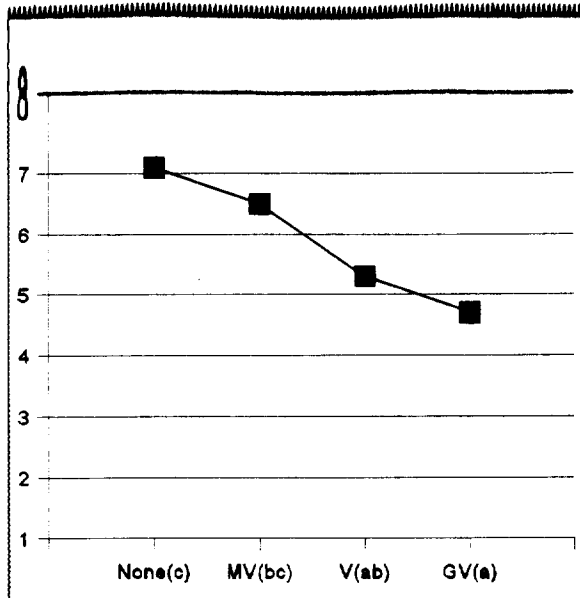
### **Impact of Content Codes on Evaluations**

To determine the effects of the movie's rating on how much children liked the movie clip, how exciting and violent they thought it was, and how justified they believed the violence was, two-way (rating by sex) ANCOVAs were performed, controlling for question order, within each age group. Only the children who had correctly remembered the movie's rating were used in the analyses. The Tukey post-hoc tests used in the previous analyses were performed whenever significant results were observed.

**Younger children.** Because of the small number of younger children who were included in the analyses, one of the eight cells representing the interaction between rating and sex was empty. As a result, only the main effects (representing populated cells) were analyzed among the younger group of children. One significant effect was found. A main effect of rating was observed for how exciting children found the scene,  $F(3, 16) = 3.36$ ,  $p < .05$ . Post-hoc tests revealed that children who saw no rating found the scene significantly less exciting ( $M = 0.48_a$ ) than children who either saw "GV: Graphic Violence" ( $M = 3.1_b$ ), or "MV: Mild Violence" ( $M = 2.9_b$ ). Children who saw the "V: Violence" label ( $M = 1.7_{ab}$ ) were in between. Because this analysis is based on only 22 children, the results must be considered highly tentative, at best.

**Older children.** Older children's perceptions of the clip were influenced by the rating it had received in two cases. First, a significant main effect of rating was observed for perceptions of how justified it was for the hero to hit the villain,  $F(3, 55) = 4.67$ ,  $p < .01$ . (See Figure 17.) Post-hoc tests revealed that older children who were in the "GV: Graphic Violence" condition believed it was less right for the hero to hit the villain ( $M = 4.7$ ) than children in either the "MV: Mild Violence" condition ( $M = 6.5$ ) or the no rating condition ( $M = 7.1$ ). Further, children in the "V: Violence" condition found the act significantly less justified ( $M = 5.3$ ) than children who saw no rating ( $M = 7.1$ ).

**Figure 17**  
**Older Children's Perceptions of How "Right" It Was**  
**for Hero to Hit Villain as a Function of Content Codes**

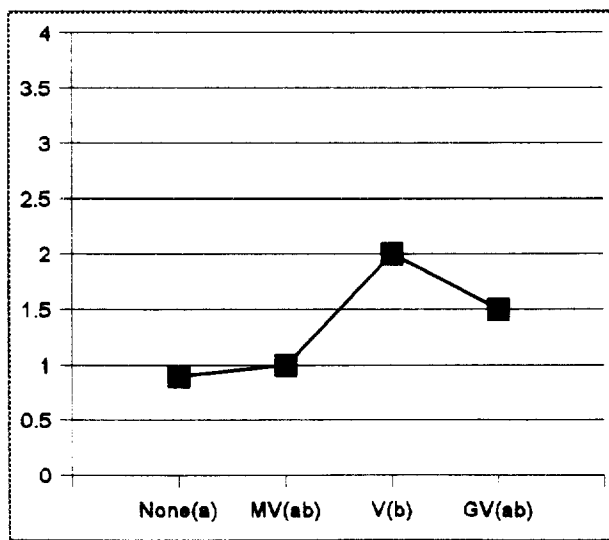


Note. Conditions with no parenthesized letter in common are significantly different. Scores could range from 1, "very very wrong," to 8, "very very right."

MV: Mild Violence  
V: Violence  
GV: Graphic Violence

Second, an effect of rating, approaching significance, was observed for how violent the older children found the scene,  $F(3, 58) = 2.27$ ,  $p = .09$ . (See Figure 18.) Subsequent tests revealed that children who saw no rating found the scene significantly less violent ( $M = 0.96$ ) than children in the "V: Violence" condition ( $M = 2.0$ ).

**Figure 18**  
**Older Children's Perceptions of Degree of Violence in Movie Scene**  
**as a Function of Content Codes**



Note. Conditions with no parenthesized letter in common are significantly different. Scores could range from 0, "not at all violent," to 4, "very very violent."

MV: Mild Violence  
V: Violence  
GV: Graphic Violence

## **Chapter 2**

### **THE USE OF ADVISORIES AND RATINGS IN THE COMPOSITE WEEK OF TELEVISION**

This part of the report describes the use of advisories, ratings, and content codes in the random sample of television that was content analyzed at Santa Barbara and Austin. When programs were screened by the content coders, they were given codes for the presence of advisories, MPAA ratings, and the more specific content codes being used by some premium channels. The coders also indicated whether these messages were communicated orally, in written form, or both orally and in writing. The text of all advisories was transcribed verbatim.

#### **Coding of Advisories**

##### **Presence of Oral and Written Advisories**

Advisories refer to short verbal messages that precede programs and can take a variety of forms, but typically involve advocating caution or discretion regarding the upcoming program (e.g., “viewer discretion advised”). A few advisories characterize the program in other ways, such as involving actual footage or dramatizations of real events. Advisories were analyzed separately from the MPAA Ratings (G, PG, PG-13, and R), and the content codes (e.g., MV: Mild Violence). The data sets that were assembled at Santa Barbara and Austin indicated whether or not an oral advisory was aired with a program and whether or not a written advisory was present. Two coders at the Madison site independently categorized the text of the advisories on a series of variables. Reliability was computed as Cohen’s Kappa.

##### **Text of Advisories**

The text of advisories was coded using the same characteristics as in Year 1.

**Whose discretion is advocated?** The advisories were first coded according to whether or not discretion was advised, and further, according to whose discretion was being advocated. Advisories were coded as advocating “parental” discretion (e.g., “parental discretion advised”), “viewer” discretion, (e.g., “viewer discretion advised”), “discretion” without a specific target (e.g., “discretion advised”), as presenting a “warning” or other admonition, but no mention of discretion (e.g., “warning: this program contains ...”), or as including no reference to discretion or warnings (Kappa = 1.00).

**Unsuitable for which viewers?** Independent of the presence of “discretion” or “warnings,” the advisories were coded for whether they indicated that the program might be inappropriate for specific viewer categories. Advisories were coded as indicating that the content might be inappropriate for children, (e.g., “portions of the following may not be suitable for younger audiences”) or for unspecified viewers, not including children (e.g., “the following movie may be too intense for some viewers”), or as not indicating any inappropriate viewer categories (Kappa = .94).

**Content mentioned.** Five variables indicated whether or not the advisory mentioned the following content: violence, language, sex or nudity, adult themes, or unspecified inappropriate content. An example of the latter category is “the following program contains certain scenes [which may be too intense for young children]” (Kappa = 1.00).

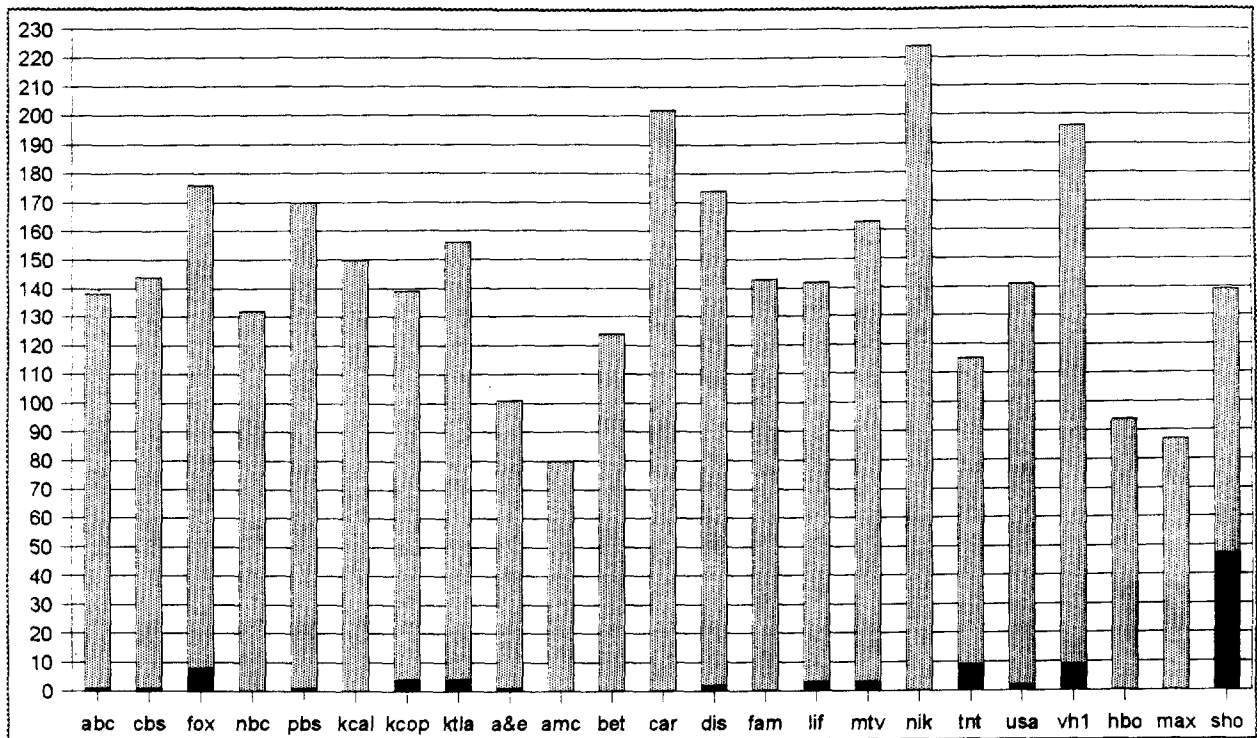
**Humor.** A final variable indicated whether or not the advisory seemed to be presented in a “tongue in cheek” fashion, rather than in a serious mode. For example, the following advisory aired on MTV: “Beavis & Butthead are not role models. They’re not even human. They’re cartoons. Some of the things they do would cause a person to get hurt, expelled, arrested, possibly deported. To put it another way: Don’t try this at home.” (Kappa = 1.00).

### **Use of Advisories in the Sample**

#### **Presence of Oral and Written Advisories**

Of the 3,235 programs that were coded, 75 (2%) were presented with an oral advisory and 95 (3%) were presented with a written advisory. There were no oral advisories that were not accompanied by written text, but 20 advisories were presented in written form only. These written-only advisories appeared on the following channels: Fox (7), TNT (5), KTLA (4), Lifetime (3), and KCOP (1). The data on advisories that will be reported represent the written advisories. Figure 19 shows the distribution of advisories over the various channels. As can be seen from the figure, of the 23 channels recorded, nine had no advisories in the sample. In Year 1, there were eight channels that had no advisories. As in Year 1, Showtime was the heaviest user of advisories, again showing almost half of all advisories in the sample.

**Figure 19**  
**Number of Programs and Advisories by Channel in the Composite Week of Programming**



Note: The shaded area indicates the total number of programs in the composite week. The black portion represents the number of programs with written advisories.

When we reanalyzed the use of advisories, this time looking only at the 1611 programs that were coded as containing violence, we found that 78, or 5% of these were shown with advisories.

### **Text of Advisories**

Figure 20 shows the percentage of advisories that advocated different groups' discretion. As in Year 1, "viewer discretion" was the most frequent category, with 64%. The next most frequent categories were "warning" (13%), and "parental discretion" (12%).

**Figure 20**  
**Percent of Advisories Advocating Discretion**

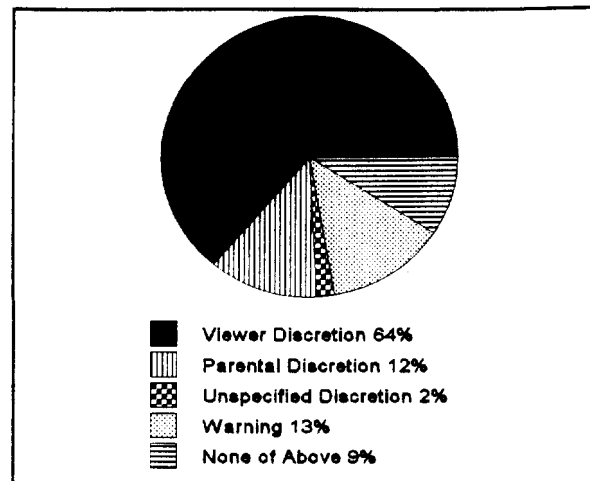
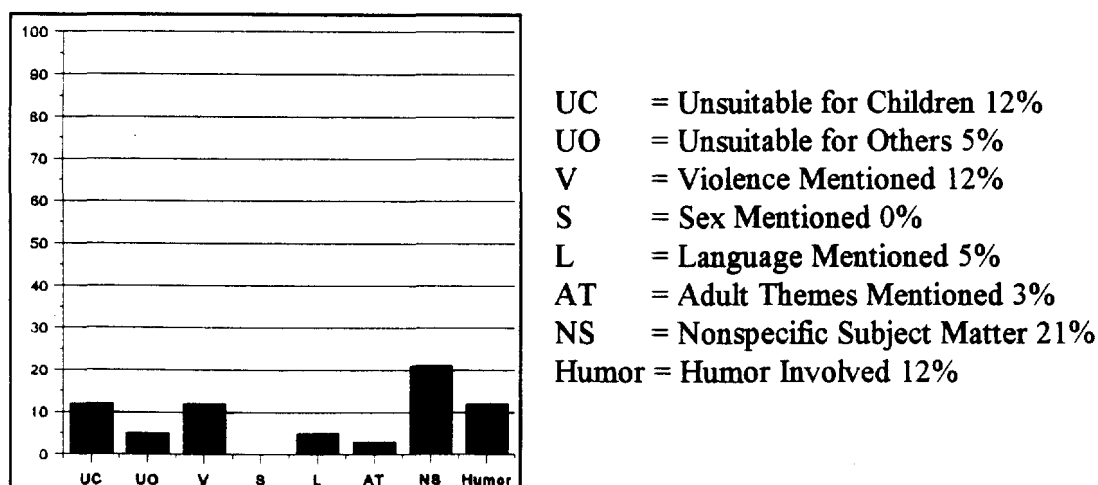


Figure 21 shows the distribution of other content features of advisories in the sample. As can be seen from the figure, 12% mentioned the unsuitability of the content for children and 5% mentioned unsuitability without specifying children. The mention of specific content was rare, with 12% of advisories mentioning violence, 5% mentioning language, 3% mentioning adult themes, and none explicitly mentioning sexual content. Nonspecific content was mentioned the most frequently (21%). Finally, 12% of the advisories involved humor. Most of these humorous advisories were the same ones that had been observed in Year 1 on MTV and VH1. A disclaimer that was not found in Year 1 appeared on the cartoon *Animaniacs*, which warned that the program might cause “uncontrollable reflex movements of the legs and feet.”

**Figure 21**  
**Percent of Advisories with Specific Content**



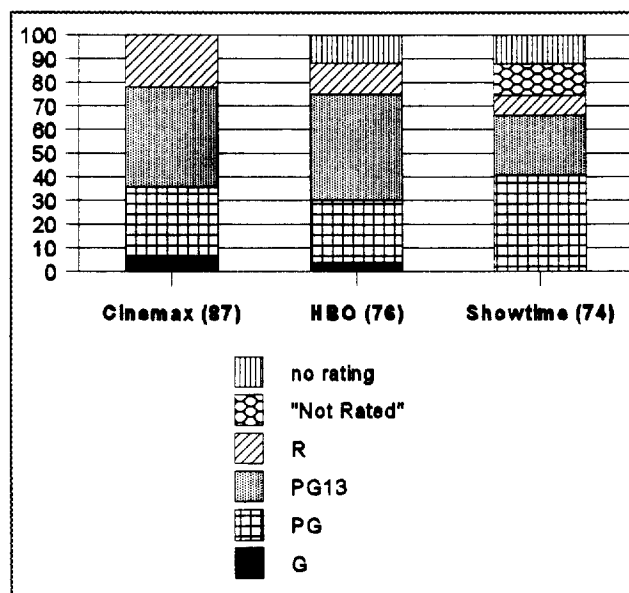
## Use of Ratings and Content Codes in the Sample

All complete programs in the sample were screened by the content coders in Santa Barbara and Austin for the presence of MPAA ratings and specific content codes. Ratings and content codes were coded according to their mode of presentation, that is, written only, oral only, or both oral and written. They were also coded according to which rating or code was used.

### MPAA Ratings

Because MPAA ratings are used only for movies, the analysis to be reported for these ratings involved only those programs that were classified as movies. Of the 459 movies in the sample, 252 or 55% were shown without an MPAA rating designation, and 205 were designated as "G," "PG," "PG-13," "R," or "not rated." Almost all of these designations were given in both oral and written form. As we found in Year 1, the MPAA ratings were used predominantly on the premium channels Cinemax, HBO, and Showtime. Again in Year 2, the only other channel using them was KTLA, which broadcast two movies with an "R" rating. Figure 22 shows the use of the MPAA ratings on the three premium channels. Combining the premium channels, 82% of movies were shown with an MPAA rating. Again most movies were rated "PG" (30%), or "PG-13" (35%). While only 3% were rated "G," 14% were rated "R." Four percent of these movies were labeled "not rated" and 14% had no rating designation. Again, as in Year 1, there were no movies rated "X" or "NC-17" in the sample.

**Figure 22**  
**Percent of Movies on Premium Channels with MPAA Ratings**



Note. Numbers in parentheses show total number of movies on each channel.

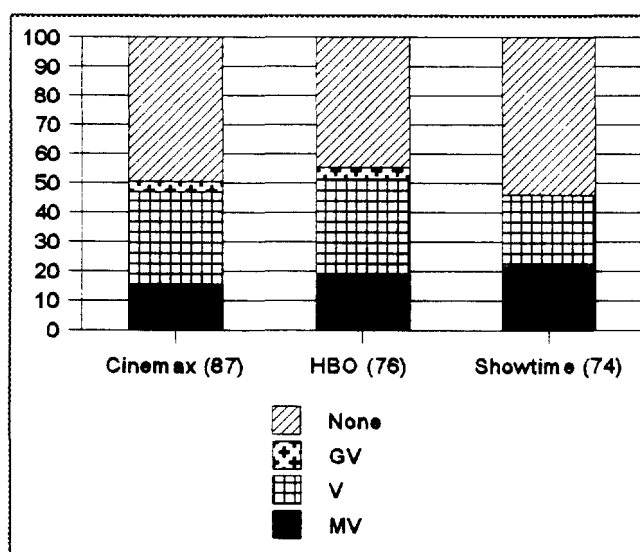
There is, of course, a good reason why MPAA ratings are used almost exclusively by the premium channels. These are the only channels that regularly show movies without editing for television. Once the content of a movie is altered, its original MPAA designation may no longer be applicable.

### **Content Codes**

Content codes are independent of any MPAA designation, and are assigned to a movie by the channel carrying it. The codes involve notations for violence, language, nudity, adult content, and rape. Like the MPAA ratings, the content codes were used almost exclusively by the three premium channels, with the exception again being KTLA, which showed two movies with “V” for violence, “AC” for adult content and “AL” for adult language. These were the same two movies that had been broadcast with the MPAA rating of “R.”

Figure 23 shows the percentage of movies broadcast on the three premium channels that used content codes for violence. As can be seen from the figure, about half of the movies on these three channels bore these codes. Most of these were simply “violence” codes (30% of movies), with 18% showing “mild violence,” and less than 3% using the “graphic violence” code.

**Figure 23**  
**Percent of Movies on Premium Channels with Violence Codes**



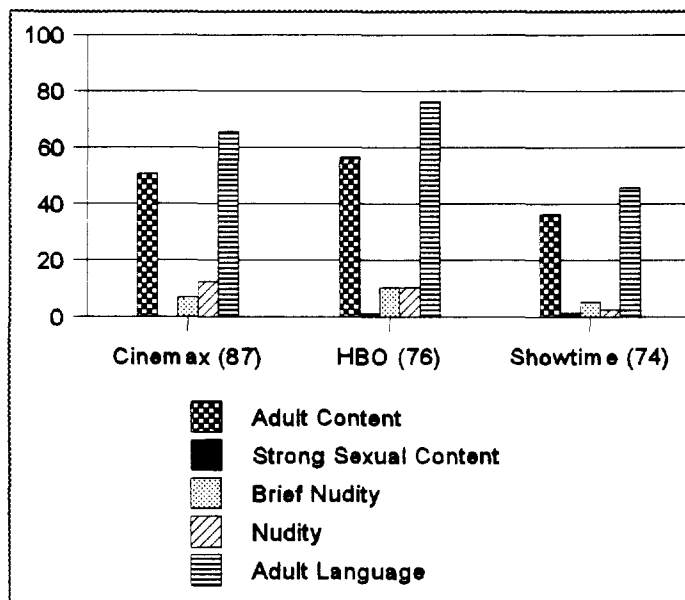
Note. Numbers in parentheses show total number of movies on each channel.



We also looked at the use of violence codes in the subset of movies that had been content analyzed as containing violence. Of the 237 movies on the premium channels, 216, or 91% contained violence according to the content analysis definition. Two movies that received codes for “mild violence,” both shown on Cinemax, were designated by the content analysis as not meeting the violence criteria in our definition. Looking only at those movies that had been content analyzed as containing violence, 118, or 55% were shown with a violence code.

Figure 24 shows the percentage of movies that used the other content codes, for the three premium channels separately. As in Year 1, these labels were used frequently. Combining the three premium channels, the language codes were the most heavily used, with 63% of the movies aired on these channels featuring the code “AL: Adult Language.” The “AC: Adult Content” code was also heavily used, with 48% of movies using this label. Fewer than 1% of movies used the “Strong Sexual Content” label. Nudity notations were used on 17% of movies, with 8% carrying the “BN: Brief Nudity” code and another 9% carrying the “N: Nudity” label. The codes for Graphic Language (GL), and Rape (RP) were not used in the sample.

**Figure 24**  
**Percent of Movies on Premium Channels with Other Content Codes**



Note. Numbers in parentheses show total number of movies on each channel.

Showtime presented almost all of the content codes both visually and orally. In contrast, almost all of the content codes that were presented on HBO and Cinemax were presented visually only.

### **Scheduling of Advisories, Ratings, and Codes**

To determine how programs with advisories were distributed throughout the day, days were divided into dayparts consistent with the analyses being conducted at the other sites. Programs were placed into dayparts as a function of the time a program began. The dayparts are as follows:

- 1: 6-9, early morning
- 2: 9-3, daytime
- 3: 3-6, late afternoon
- 4: 6-8, early evening
- 5: 8-11, prime time

As can be seen from Figure 25, the proportion of programs aired with advisories increased over the course of the day. This is consistent with the pattern for Year 1.

**Figure 25**  
**Percent of Programs Aired with Advisories by Daypart**

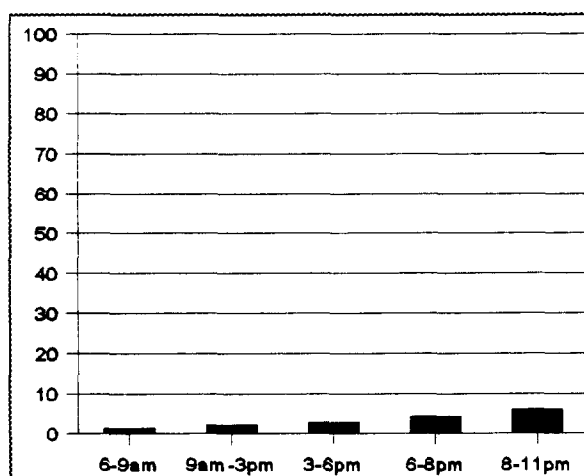
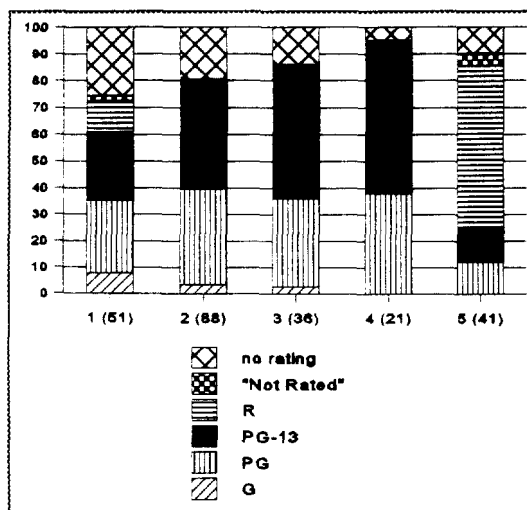


Figure 26 shows the use of MPAA ratings on premium channels by daypart. As can be seen from the figure, no "G"-rated movies in the sample were aired after 6 p.m. "R"-rated movies were shown only in the prime time and early morning time periods.

**Figure 26**  
**Percent of Movies on Premium Channels with MPAA Ratings by Daypart**

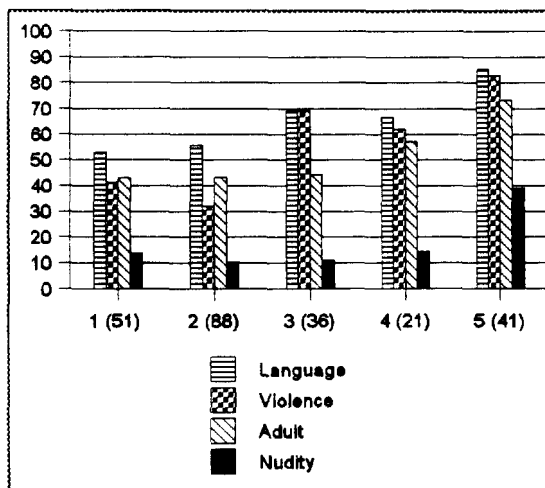


Numbers in parentheses show total number of movies in each daypart.

Dayparts: 1 = 6-9 am  
2 = 9 am-3 pm  
3 = 3-6 pm  
4 = 6-8 pm  
5 = 8-11 pm

Figure 27 shows the use of content codes on premium channels by daypart. This figure indicates that, generally speaking, the use of these codes increases over the course of the day.

**Figure 27**  
**Percent of Movies with Content Codes on Premium Channels by Daypart**



Numbers in parentheses show total number of movies in each daypart.

Dayparts: 1 = 6-9 am  
2 = 9 am-3 pm  
3 = 3-6 pm  
4 = 6-8 pm  
5 = 8-11 pm

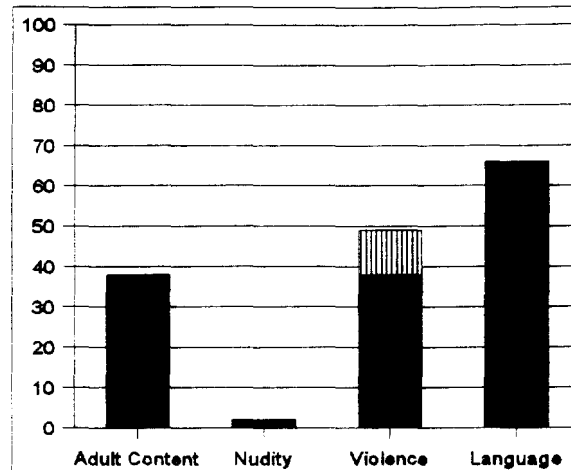
## **Relationship Between MPAA Ratings and Content Codes**

A final set of analyses was undertaken to determine the degree to which the MPAA ratings observed in the sample correspond to the amount and type of controversial content in the programs. MPAA ratings have often been criticized for being summary judgments and for not communicating the specific content that prompted a particular rating. Although the Year 2 analyses did not permit us to compare a movie's MPAA rating to its actual content -- such analyses are planned for Year 3 -- the approach we used was to relate a movie's MPAA rating to the content codes it was assigned by the premium channel showing it.

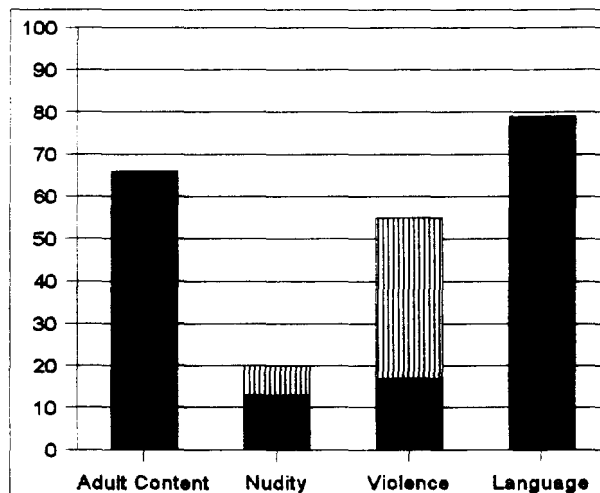
This analysis revealed that the MPAA rating of "G" effectively designated movies without controversial content, although it will be recalled that there were very few movies so designated (7 out of 237 movies on the premium channels). None of these movies had codes for violence, adult language, sex, or nudity. Analysis of movies rated "PG" and "PG-13" revealed considerable similarity in their contents. In previous analyses conducted on the Year 1 sample of television, it was determined that a portion of the similarity could be attributed to the fact that there was no "PG-13" rating prior to 1984 (see Cantor, Harrison, & Krcmar, in press). Therefore, many movies that were rated "PG" before that time would probably be rated "PG-13" under the present system. Because of this change in the rating system, the analyses we will report here will be limited to movies that were released in 1984 or later.

Figures 28 and 29 show the percent of post-1983 movies rated "PG" and "PG-13" that were presented with codes for adult content, nudity, violence, and language. As can be seen from these figures, although there is a substantial difference in the proportion of movies with the two ratings that contain adult content and nudity, these two ratings are much less distinct in terms of violence and language. The proportion of movies rated "PG" and "PG-13" with violence codes is similar, but a higher proportion of the former are designed with "mild violence" as opposed to "violence." Only a slightly higher proportion of "PG-13" movies than "PG" movies contain adult language.

**Figure 28**  
**Percent of PG-Rated Movies Having Each Content Code--Post-1983 Sample**



**Figure 29**  
**Percent of PG-13-Rated Movies Having Each Content Code--Post-1983 Sample**



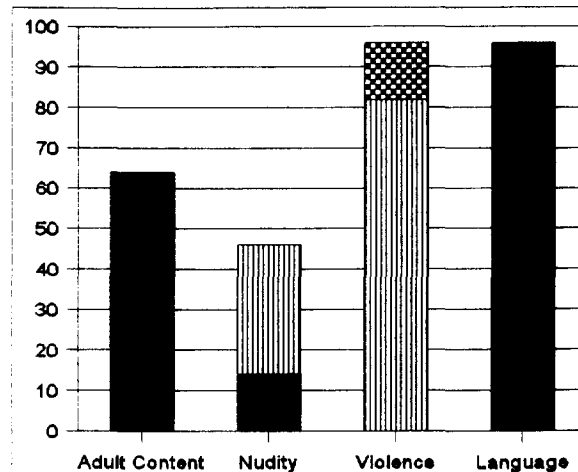
For Figures 28 and 29:

Solid bars = "Adult Content," "Brief Nudity," "Mild Violence," "Adult Language."

Striped bars = "Nudity," "Violence."

Figure 30 provides the same information for "R"-rated movies in the post-1983 sample. Although these movies apparently contain a good deal more nudity, violence, and adult language than those rated "PG-13," they are no more likely to be designated as having "adult content."

**Figure 30**  
**Percent of R-Rated Movies Having Each Content Code--Post-1983 Sample**



Solid bars = "Adult Content," "Brief Nudity," "Mild Violence," "Adult Language."  
 Striped bars = "Nudity," "Violence."  
 Checkered bar = "Graphic Violence."

These data reveal that MPAA ratings are not very informative of the type and amount of controversial content in a movie.

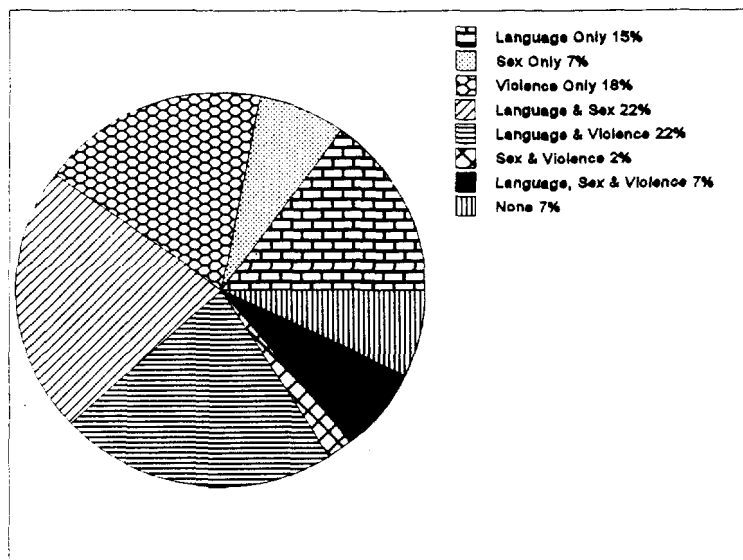
Further analyses were conducted to explore another frequent criticism of MPAA ratings -- the fact that they do not specify which type of content led to a movie's assignment to a particular rating. A parent who is concerned with violence but not language, for example, cannot tell from the rating itself whether the movie received its rating because of one or both or neither of these types of content.

We determined the frequency with which the various MPAA ratings were associated with language, violence, and sex, alone or in various combinations. For simplicity's sake we combined the "adult content" and "nudity" codes into a single category suggesting sexual content. We then determined, for each MPAA rating, what percentage of the post-1983 movies in the sample was aired with each of these three types of content codes alone and in all possible combinations thereof.

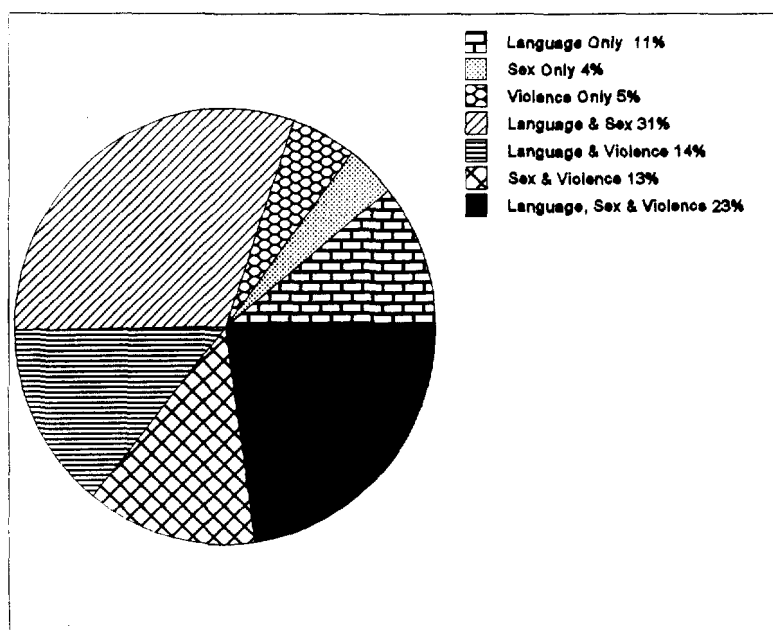
Figures 31, 32, and 33, show these data for the "PG," "PG-13," and "R" ratings. These figures show that with the "PG" rating, it is extremely difficult to know what type of content to expect. For example, 15% of these movies have adult language only, and 18% have violence only. Another 22% have language and sex, but no violence. A

similar degree of uncertainty is associated with the “PG-13” rating. Only with the “R” rating does a parent have a good idea of what to expect in a movie. This is because the majority of these movies (68%) contain all three forms of controversial content: sex, violence and adult language.

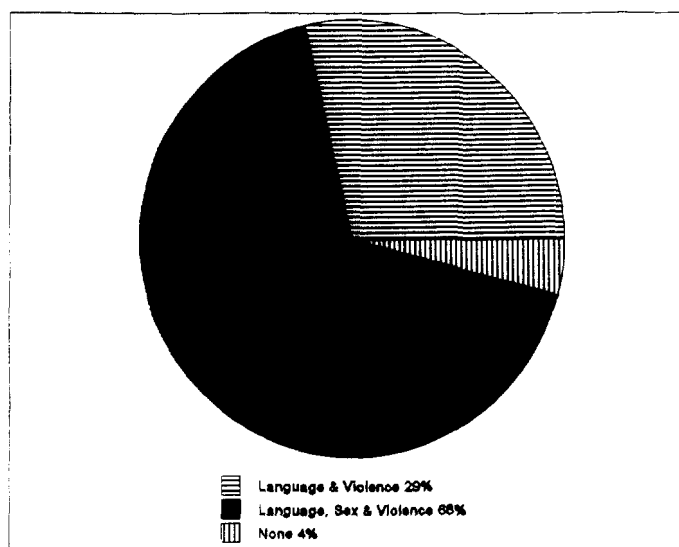
**Figure 31**  
**Distribution of Language, Sex, & Violence Codes in Post-1983 PG-Rated Movies**



**Figure 32**  
**Distribution of Language, Sex, & Violence Codes in Post-1983 PG-13-Rated Movies**



**Figure 33**  
**Distribution of Language, Sex, & Violence Codes in Post-1983 R-Rated Movies**





## **Chapter 3**

### **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The results of the Year 2 research on ratings and advisories replicated and extended the research conducted for Year 1. The experimental work repeated the inquiry into the effects of ratings and advisories on children's interest in programs and expanded it to include additional rating systems. Like Year 1, the Year 2 research showed that "parental discretion advised" increased boys' interest in a program, although this occurred only in the younger group. Also as in Year 1, the more restrictive MPAA ratings increased older children's interest in a movie, and the lowest level, "G" rating decreased their interest.

What is impressive about this repeated finding regarding MPAA ratings is that it was observed with a very different sample from that tested in Year 1, with an entirely different movie description, and with a different rating scale for measuring interest. Morkes, Chen, and Roberts (1997) have also recently reported that more restrictive MPAA ratings made 11- to 14-year-olds more eager to see a movie.

Five other rating systems were tested: premium channel violence codes, the Canadian system, the Recreational Software Advisory Council system, ratings indicating the intended viewer age, and ratings based on awards. However, none of these rating systems increased children's interest in programs. This is important new knowledge because the Year 1 research had not subjected any other rating systems to the test that revealed the "magnetic" effect of more restrictive MPAA ratings. The Year 2 research demonstrates that such a magnetic effect does not necessarily occur in all rating systems. When tested under the same conditions, the only system that revealed this effect was the MPAA ratings. The only rating system besides the MPAA that affected children's interest in programs, the premium channel violence codes, reduced younger children's interest in the program rather than increasing it.

#### **The Impact of Background Variables**

The Year 2 research also explored the relationship between background variables and the effect of advisories and ratings on children's viewing preferences. Although the MPAA ratings did not show an effect on younger children overall, more aggressive younger children showed greater interest in a movie when it had more restrictive MPAA ratings and less interest when it had less restrictive ratings. Specifically, even after controlling for the child's sex, the more younger children said they get into fights with other children, the more they were interested in the movie when it was rated "R," and the

less they were interested in the same movie when it was rated "G." Moreover, the more younger children said they like to watch TV, the more they were attracted to a movie rated "R," and the less they wanted to see it if it was rated "G." Two other rating systems also had different effects on younger children as a function of aggression-related variables: The more younger children said they liked "rough and tumble games," the less they were interested in a program with the Canadian code of "no violence," and the more they said they liked to watch violent TV, the more they wanted to see a show with the highest RSAC rating ("Wanton and Gratuitous Violence").

Fewer background variables were related to the impact of ratings on older children. One relationship we did observe was that above and beyond the impact of MPAA ratings, the more older children said they like to watch violent TV programs, the less they were interested in seeing a movie rated "G" and the more they were interested in a movie rated "PG-13." The only other influence of background variables that we observed on older children was that those who said they become frightened by scary stories were less interested in programs that were labeled as appropriate for 13-year-olds and older and 17-year-olds and older.

On an encouraging note, among younger children, those who said their parents were more actively involved in their TV viewing were less interested in a program labeled "contains some violent content." This finding is consistent with results from Year 1, which showed that children whose parents were more involved in their television viewing were less interested in programs labeled "parental discretion advised," and less eager to see movies rated "PG-13" or "R."

### **Effects of Ratings on Children's Expectations**

The various ratings and advisories had very few effects on younger children's expectations regarding the programs they were associated with. We did find that the higher level RSAC ratings and some of the Canadian ratings led to expectations of greater violence than lower levels. These expectations did not increase these children's interest in the programs, however. Moreover, younger children's expectations of programs labeled as containing "graphic violence" suggest that they are unaware that this term implies high violence levels. The various ratings had no consistent effects on younger children's ratings of expected scariness or age-appropriateness.

Older children's expectations were affected by many of the rating systems, however. Specifically, older children generally expected more violence as the MPAA ratings became more restrictive. They also expected more violence in the higher level ratings of the premium channel codes and the Canadian system. They still did not fully appreciate that a program labeled "graphic violence" would have more violence than one

simply labeled “violence.” They did, however, expect that such a program would be scarier.

Only the MPAA ratings and the Age Indicators affected older children’s expectations of age-appropriateness. These children knew that “R” was more appropriate for older viewers than the other ratings. They also understood that the specific Age Indicators suggested the appropriate age for children to see a program.

Overall, these findings provide more support for the “forbidden fruit” hypothesis than the information rationale. The more restrictive MPAA ratings, which were the only ones that significantly increased older children’s interest, affected both their expectations of violence and their judgments of age appropriateness. However, the Age Indicators also affected judgments of age appropriateness but did not influence children’s interest. Furthermore, many of the rating systems affected children’s expectations for violence without influencing their interest in the program.

Recent research by other investigators also leans in favor of the forbidden fruit hypothesis. For example, Bushman (1996) has recently reported that warning labels increased 15- to 20-year-olds’ interest in a movie, whereas content labels did not.

One possible explanation for the findings may be that ratings or advisories that urge parental control of children based on the implication that the youngsters are not mature enough are the most likely to produce the “forbidden fruit” effect. Both the “parental discretion advised” effect on younger boys and the effect of “PG-13” and “R” on older children fit these criteria. The Age Indicators, which simply stated the expected age of viewers without calling for any sort of parental guidance, did not produce the same effect. And none of the ratings that influenced expectations of violence without suggesting who should see the program increased children’s interest.

### **Impact of Content Codes on Interpretation of Violent Video**

Children’s reactions to the video clip that had been associated with the premium channel codes of “MV: Mild Violence,” “V: Violence,” or “GV: Graphic Violence” or with no rating provided some tentative evidence that a more severe violence rating might affect the way children evaluate the violence they see. However, very few (13%) of the younger children could state correctly what the movie’s rating had been after seeing it, and only about one-third of the older children could remember it. Of those older children who remembered the movie’s rating, those in the “V: Violence” and “GV: Graphic Violence” conditions believed it was less justified for the hero to hit the villain than those who saw no rating. Also, children in the “V: Violence” condition saw the scene as more violent than those who saw no rating. Because of the low percentage of children who

recalled the movie's rating, however, these findings need to be replicated before any firm conclusions should be drawn.

### **The Use of Ratings and Advisories on Television**

The analysis of the use of ratings and advisories during the composite week of television yielded findings that were very much like those from Year 1. Again a very small proportion of programs were aired with advisories (3%), and approximately half of those again came from one channel, Showtime. Looking only at those programs that were designated by the content analysis as containing violence, 5% carried advisories.

As in Year 1, the MPAA ratings and premium channel content codes were used almost exclusively by the premium channels. Combining the premium channels, most movies were rated "PG" (30%), or "PG-13" (35%). While only 3% were rated "G," 14% were rated "R." Four percent of these movies were labeled "not rated" and 14% had no rating designation.

The content codes were also used heavily by the premium channels. Although 91% of movies on the premium channels were coded as containing violence, only 51% contained a violence code (55% of the movies that the content analysis determined contained violence).

An analysis of the movies that were aired with both MPAA ratings and the premium channel content codes showed that there is considerable overlap in content between the various levels of MPAA ratings, especially between the ratings of "PG" and "PG-13." In addition, an analysis of the frequency with which the various types of content codes appeared alone and in different combinations in movies with different MPAA ratings showed that "PG" and "PG-13" ratings signal a wide variety of disparate possibilities of content combinations.

### **Implications for the New Television Rating System**

Analysis of the correspondence between MPAA ratings and content codes in the composite week of television revealed that the different MPAA ratings do not clearly communicate the specific contents of programs. These findings support recent survey research which shows that U.S. parents overwhelmingly prefer ratings that indicate specific content separately for violence, sex, and language, and find age-based systems much less useful (Cantor, Stutman, & Duran, 1996; Silver & Geier, 1996).

The findings of the Year 2 experiment reconfirm and amplify the problems of MPAA ratings that were observed in Year 1. Not only did the higher level MPAA ratings

make movies more attractive to older children, they were the only one of the six rating systems tested to attract children to restricted content. Moreover, these restrictive ratings attracted younger children who like to watch television the most and who by their own admission get involved in fights with other children more frequently. Finally, the MPAA rating of "PG-13" was especially attractive to older children who like to watch violent television.

Of all the rating systems tested, then, the "forbidden fruit" effect turned out to be strongest for the rating system most like the one that has been adopted by the television industry. The new rating system seems likely to produce the same effect, because it, too, provides guidance on the appropriate age for viewing while exhorting parental control over children's access to programs.

The results of the Year 2 research reveal, then, that the industry's choice of a rating system is not only destined to be uninformative for parents, it is likely to make their job of protecting children harder by making restricted programs more attractive. The systems which merely provided content information, when subjected to the same test as the MPAA ratings, did not make programs containing violence more tantalizing.

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**PART III**

**RATINGS AND ADVISORIES  
FOR TELEVISION PROGRAMMING:  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, MADISON STUDY**

**YEAR 1**

**Dr. Joanne Cantor  
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## SUMMARY

Researchers at the Madison site conducted an experiment involving 297 children, ranging in age from five to 14 years, from a variety of schools in Madison, Wisconsin. Each child was given a mock channel guide. To insure that the children would tell us what they really wanted to see, we assured them of anonymity and told them that their choices would influence what we would actually show them later in the session.

Our findings indicate that advisories and ratings strongly influenced children's choices. When children were given the choice between three programs, one of which was, at random, associated with "parental discretion advised," boys, and particularly older boys (ages 10 to 14), chose the program with the advisory significantly more often than would be expected by chance. In contrast, when children were given the choice between three other programs, one of which was, at random, associated with "viewer discretion advised," girls, and particularly younger girls (ages five to nine), chose the program with the advisory significantly less often than would be expected by chance. Children were also given the choice between three movies, two of which were always rated "PG," with the third being rated "G," "PG," "PG-13," or "R" in different booklets. All groups except the older boys displayed a definite tendency to avoid the target movie when it had an "R" rating. Younger girls, in fact, chose the target movie the most when they thought it was rated "G." In contrast, not one of the older boys chose the target movie when they were told it was rated "G," but at least half of those who were told it was rated "PG-13" or "R" chose it.

In general, children who said their parents were more involved in their TV viewing and children who had been frightened by television in the past were more likely to avoid programs with restrictive advisories and ratings. In contrast, children who reported engaging in more aggression-related activities were more likely to choose programs with advisories.

In another study, we videotaped 70 parent-child pairs discussing which programs the child would watch during a similar experiment. Although almost all of the parents' comments about advisories and ratings were negative, half of the comments children made about them were favorable (e.g., "the cooler the movie, the higher the rating").

We also evaluated the use of advisories and ratings in the random sample of television programming. Very few shows (less than 4%) used advisories such as "viewer discretion advised," and the content that prompted the advisory was rarely denoted. Content information was most prevalent on the three premium channels, HBO, Showtime, and Cinemax. The majority of movies shown on these channels displayed both an MPAA rating and codes denoting specific content, such as violence or adult language.

The findings are discussed in terms of the risks and benefits of ratings and advisories, and the importance of how such messages are designed and worded.



## RATINGS AND ADVISORIES FOR TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

The Madison-based research explored how various types of ratings and advisories are used to indicate the presence of violence in programs and movies that appear on television. In addition, it investigated how children, their parents, and other adults perceive, comprehend and respond to violence ratings and advisories.

Both cable channels and network stations have promised to increase their use of messages warning the viewer of potentially problematic content in an attempt to give viewers notice of what they will be exposed to, and especially to help parents exert control over their children's violent TV intake. In 1973, a nationwide *TV Guide* survey reported that 55% of those questioned were in favor of a rating system for television programming (Wurtzel & Surlin, 1978). By 1993, a *USA Weekend* reader survey reported 73% agreement with this idea (Federman, 1993). In a telephone survey we conducted in the spring of 1994, 91% of a random sample of parents of elementary school children in Madison, Wisconsin agreed that broadcasters and cable operators should be required to issue advisories regarding violent content or give violent programs movie-type ratings.

To date, however, there is surprisingly little research regarding the impact or effectiveness of ratings and advisories. The few studies that have been conducted are described here. A major issue has been whether advisories and ratings have their intended effect, that is, to prevent people from being exposed to content that they wish to avoid, and to help parents protect their children from being exposed to problematic content. There has been concern that they might have a "boomerang" effect, that is, that they would make the content seem more interesting and exciting and attract a larger audience.

A study by Wurtzel and Surlin (1978) reported on a random survey of attitudes toward viewer advisories among adults in Athens, Georgia in 1976. Almost all respondents in this survey reported that they had seen advisory warnings on TV. However, only 24% stated that the advisories had influenced them in deciding whether to watch a show. Interestingly, of these respondents, 39% reported that the advisory resulted in their not watching the show, but 24% said that the advisory made them watch the show with increased interest.

Wurtzel and Surlin found, however, a strong difference between viewers who had children and those who did not. Thirty-four percent of respondents with children reported that their own viewing had been influenced by the warnings, compared to 17% of respondents without children. Furthermore, 54% of the respondents with children stated that the warnings had influenced their decisions about their child's viewing. The overwhelming majority (81%) of the parents who had been influenced said they had not let their children watch the program, and most of the remainder said that although they had let their children watch, they had watched the program with them.